

## THE NOSE KNOWS: ENCOUNTERING THE CANINE IN *BISCLAVRET*

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A dog is in general sagacious, but particularly with respect to his master; for when he has for some time lost him in a crowd, he depends more upon his nose than upon his eyes; and, in endeavouring to find him, he first looks about, and then applies his nose, for greater certainty, to his clothes, as if nature had placed all the powers of infallibility in that feature.

—Gerald of Wales, *Journey Through Wales*

The nose symbolizes discernment, whereby we elect virtue and reject sin.

—Gregory the Great, *Book of Pastoral Rule*

For much of literary history, scholars have tended to focus on the symbolic valence of animals, to read their behavior and characteristics as representative of explicitly human interests and concerns. In the past medievalists have perhaps been even more prone to this, given that many of our sources providing descriptions of animal behavior, such as bestiaries, similarly emphasize the metaphorical or allegorical over the ethological.<sup>1</sup> Thus when we read something like *Bisclavret*, Marie de France's twelfth-century Anglo-Norman lai, scholars frequently discuss its werewolf protagonist as a foil for his much more beastly if wholly human wife. Michelle Freeman, for example, concludes that the werewolf's wife "devour[s] the human being who was her husband, having made him, as well as her lover, prey to her own ambitions and pride. In this sense, the *bisclavret's* Lady turns out to be the real werewolf, or *garvalf*, of the story" (294). Others read Marie's werewolf as a metaphor for taming the beast within. Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner sees *Bisclavret's* fundamental conflict as the need to learn to "control the beast with his human 'entente e sen [understanding and intelligence]'" (259), while Robert Hanning and Joan Ferrante describe the lai as a whole as "a parable about the forces of bestiality that exist within human nature," one that is "concerned with the human capacity to manifest

nobility even under the most trying conditions, and thus to transcend the animal part of our nature and garner the hard-won benefits of civilization” (101).

In recent years work in critical animal studies has begun to reverse this trend by critiquing traditional humanist scholarship and, as Karl Steel explains, by “stress[ing] that the categories ‘human’ and ‘animal,’ as well as the assumption of any absolute limit between human and animals, must be radically rethought . . . [and] that the category ‘human’ is best understood by examining its dependent relation on the category ‘animal’” (4). For scholars such as Steel, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Dorothy Yamamoto, Marijane Osborn, Susan Crane, and others, the rise of critical animal theory has led to new readings of animals in medieval texts as living creatures rather than figurative representations of human experience and values. Taking such an approach to Marie’s lai, then, one must consider Bisclavret not only as man but as animal, acknowledging the significance of canine quiddity.

Indeed, all of the characteristics scholars have given as evidence of Bisclavret’s enduring inner humanity characterize another animal as well—the dog. This is a connection that Marie’s medieval audience would have recognized, for alongside the highly symbolic interpretations of animals in the Middle Ages there are instances of a much more empirical awareness and understanding of the animals medieval people encountered in their daily lives, particularly concerning dogs. I am struck, for example, by Chaucer’s highly realistic description of the whelp’s submissive stance in *The Book of the Duchess*<sup>2</sup> and by numerous observations in Bartholomaeus Anglicus’ *De proprietatibus rerum* that any modern trainer would recognize as indicative of intimate familiarity with actual dog perception and behavior.<sup>3</sup>

I am not the first to observe the doglike qualities of Marie’s werewolf. As early as 1979 Phillipe Ménard notes that Marie “en fait un animal doux et bienveillant, une sorte de chien-loup qui baise le pied du roi, couche aux pieds de son lit et lui porte une évidente affection” [“makes him a gentle and benevolent animal, a kind of dog-wolf that kisses the feet of the king, sleeps at the foot of his bed and bears him evident affection”] (177). More recently Crane observes some of the same dog-like aspects I discuss here, though like Ménard she does not explore the significance of Bisclavret *qua* dog in depth.<sup>4</sup> Pushing this observation further, I suggest that the wolf’s portrayal in Marie’s lai might in fact reflect medieval understanding of canine behavior,<sup>5</sup> giving new insight into one of the tale’s more perplexing moments: the peculiar

fate of a treacherous wife. Part of the answer, I argue, is that while medieval people would not have known the physiology of animal cognition, they were aware of the seemingly preternatural ability of dogs to judge correctly emotions and intentions that are invisible to human senses.

This is the story of Marie's lai in brief: the wife of a fine and noble knight is distressed by her husband's habitual disappearance for several days each week, and after much cajoling and wheedling with reassurances that she will love him no matter what, she draws out the knight's reluctant revelation that he becomes a werewolf. When his wife pressures him to reveal the secret of his transformation, he again reluctantly informs her that he must have his human clothes in order to return to human shape. Still more pressure leads him to reveal the hiding place where he keeps his clothing when in wolf form. The wife, horrified, promptly turns to another knight who has long declared his love for her, tells him that she returns his love, and persuades him to help her steal Bisclavret's clothing, trapping him in his wolf form. A year later, the king and his hunting party come upon the wolf in the forest and marvel at its noble and courteous behavior. The wolf returns with the king and becomes a valued member of his court, where all are amazed at its gentle manners. Thus, when the knight who assisted the wife's treachery appears at court and the wolf lunges at him in a rage, the court assumes that the wolf must be justified in some way. Similarly, when the wife appears at court the wolf also attacks her, this time biting off her nose. The king, convinced there is a reason for the beast's hatred, tortures the wife until she confesses and reveals where she has hidden her erstwhile husband's clothing. Bisclavret's clothes are returned to him and the werewolf is restored to human form. The wife and her lover are punished with exile, and the wife's disfigurement is passed down through many of her female descendants.

Readers are often left baffled by this bizarre retribution: why bite off the wife's nose, specifically? This peculiar detail is in fact unique to Marie's version of the story. In *Biclairel*, its nearest French analogue, the wife's disfigurement is not specified; we are simply told the werewolf "Grant col li fiert an mi la face, / Par po le vis ne li efface" [gave her a great blow to the middle of her face / and nearly mutilated her face] (373-74). Though critics have offered a range of interpretations for the wife's punishment in Marie's lai, approaching the significance of noselessness from a dog's perspective may deepen our understanding of the poem's central concerns. In *Bisclavret*, the wife's noselessness is a marker of

human failure of perception through her inability to recognize the truth of her husband's character. It also signifies our overreliance on forms of communication that are much more susceptible to distortion and misrepresentation. Mouths can lie, ears and eyes can be deceived, but the nose cannot.

Admittedly, a werewolf is not a dog; yet as we shall see, there are remarkable parallels between Marie's characterization of the wolf Bisclavret and medieval descriptions of dog behavior, far more so than depictions of wolves. In medieval bestiaries and encyclopedic texts, wolves are primarily characterized by their ravenous nature and rapacious greed. The Aberdeen Bestiary declares that wolves, "maddened by greed, [. . .] kill whatever they find. . . . Wolves get their name from their rapacity. . . . The wolf is a rapacious beast and craves blood" (fol. 16v-17v). The bestiary traditions also draw multiple parallels between wolves and the devil:

The Devil has the nature of a wolf; he always looks with an evil eye upon mankind and continually circles the sheepfold of the faithful of the Church, to ruin and destroy their souls. . . . The fact that its strength lies in its forequarters and not in its hindquarters also signifies the Devil, who was formerly the angel of light in heaven, but has now been made an apostate below. The wolf's eyes shine in the night like lamps because the works of the Devil seem beautiful and wholesome to blind and foolish men. . . . The fact that the wolf cannot turn his neck without turning the whole of his body signifies that the Devil never turns towards the correction of penitence. (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 16v-17v)

Surveying the depiction of wolves across multiple medieval literary genres, Aleksander Pluskowski describes the archetypal wolf as "characterized by unbridled cruelty, bestial ferocity as well as literal-mindedness and gullibility, driven by ravenous hunger" (132). In short, wolves are presented as supremely nasty, vicious creatures, and one might assume that a werewolf would exhibit similar qualities.

Initially, after clarifying the Breton and Norman words for werewolf (*bisclavret* and *garvalf* respectively), Marie characterizes werewolves in much the same way that bestiaries do wolves:

Garualf, c[eo] est beste salvage:  
Tant cum il est en cele rage,

Hummes devure, grant mal fait,  
Es granz fore[z] converse e vait. (9-12)

The werewolf is a wild beast:  
when it is in that frenzy,  
it devours people and does great harm.  
It lives in and roams the great forests.<sup>6</sup>

However, Marie follows this statement by implying a distinction between the rapacious *garvalf* and the *bisclavret* of her lai, who exhibits none of the behaviors she has just described: “Cest afere les ore ester; / Del bisclaveret [vus] voil cunter” [“Now I let this matter be; / I want to tell you about the *bisclavret*”] (13-14). In fact, Bisclavret’s behavior while in canine form far more closely corresponds to the primary characteristics of dogs in the bestiary tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Even as they acknowledge inherent similarities between dogs and their wild cousins, medieval writers draw a sharp distinction between dogs and wolves, largely stripping those similarities of their negative valences and attributing positive ones when describing dogs. This is succinctly illustrated by Gerald of Wales, who explains that “a dog’s tongue has healing power, but that of a wolf can cause death. If a dog is hurt, it can heal itself by licking the places, but a wolf’s tongue only infects the wounds” (130). Where wolves are cunning, dogs are intelligent and discerning; where wolves are rapacious, bloodthirsty man-eaters, dogs are singular in their loyalty and devotion to humans. Bartholomaeus writes that dogs “loueþ here lordes and defendeþ þe houses of here lordes; and putteþ hem willfulliche in peril of dep for here lordes. . . . And loueþ company of men and moue nouzte be wipouten men. . . . We haue conceyued þat houndes faught for here lordes azens þeues and weren sore ywounded; and þat þay kepeþ away bestes and foules from here ded lordes body; and þat a hound compellid þe sleer of his lord wip berkyng and bytyng to knowleche his trespas and gilt” (1165). Similar observations are found throughout the bestiary tradition, usually followed by several detailed examples of dogs showing unceasing devotion even after their masters’ deaths.

Among all animals, domestic or wild, dogs are particularly noted for their intelligence. Hunting manuals such as Edward of Norwich’s *The Master of Game* describe the dog as a creature “of greet vndirstondyng and of greet knowyng” and “the moost reasonable beest and beste knowyng of eny beest that evere God made” (44). Bartholomaeus

proclaims that “noþyng is more busy and witty þan þe hound for he haþ more witte þan oþer bestes” (1165), a statement also echoed in the Aberdeen Bestiary, which adds that the dog alone among other animals knows its name (fol. 18r). Medieval writers even granted dogs a degree of reason and discernment:

When a dog picks up the track of a hare or a deer and comes to a place where the trail divides or to a junction splitting into several directions, it goes to the beginning of each path and silently reasons with itself, as if by syllogism, on the basis of its keen sense of smell. “Either the animal went off in this direction,” it says, “or that, or certainly it took this turning.” (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 18v)

Indeed, in some medieval law codes dogs were perceived to have sufficient powers of independent judgment that an owner might be partially relieved of liability should the dog commit a crime. For example, while according to the laws of the Alamans the owner was responsible for the entire wergild should a horse, pig, or ox kill a man, if a dog killed a man the owner would be responsible for only half the wergild (Rivers 54-55).<sup>8</sup> Salisbury suggests that such legislation may indicate the perception that dogs had the capacity for individual agency, beyond their owner’s responsibility (30). For all that humans are supposed to be the only ones among God’s creatures endowed with reason, medieval people still seem to attribute at least some degree of rational capacity to dogs.

This is not to say that dogs in the Middle Ages are universally presented as unambiguous paragons of virtue—they, too, can be susceptible to lechery and gluttony, for example. Bartholomaeus concludes his lengthy entry on dogs with a somewhat grudging acknowledgement of their less virtuous qualities:

Houndes haueþ opere propretees þat beþ nought ful goode: for houndes haueþ continual bolysme, þat is ‘immoderate appetit,’ and beþ somtyme so punyshed wip hunger þat þay waxeþ rabbissh and woode. . . . Also he is to couetous and glotoun and eteþ þerfore ofte careynes so glotounliche þat he brakeþ and casteþ it vp. But afterward whanne he is anhungred he takeþ þat he hadde ycast vp in foul manere. . . . Also he is vnclene and leccherous. Aristotle seiþ þat houndes boþe male and female vseþ

leccherie as longe as þay ben on lyue. And ȝiueþ hem to  
 vnclennesse of lecchery þat þay takeþ no dyuersite bytwene  
 moder and suster and opere bicches, touchinge þe dede of  
 leccherie. (1169-70)

In fables and in exegetical texts, which were more interested in exploring animals as human exemplars, we tend to find more pronounced emphasis on the negative characteristics of dogs. Nevertheless the contrast between dogs and wolves remains acute, and in the bestiary tradition, as well as in encyclopedic texts such as Bartholomaeus', the positive characteristics of dogs are given far more emphasis.<sup>9</sup>

When we first see the werewolf in Marie's lai, it is hardly behaving like the ravenous and blood-thirsty wolf of the bestiary tradition, or Marie's wild, all-devouring *garvulf*. Although Bisclavret admits to his wife that when in wolf form, "En cele grant forest me met, / Al plus espés de la gaudine, / S'i vif de preie e de ravine" ["I go into that great forest, / to the deepest part of the woods, / and live on prey and plunder"] (63-66), we do not hear of or see any of the intense, mindless violence ascribed to the *garvulf*. As Robyn A. Holman points out, this is very different from *Melion*, one of the lai's close analogues, in which the werewolf routinely butchers livestock and becomes the leader of a murderous pack of wolves (4). On the contrary, Marie's werewolf exhibits the gentle demeanor and perspicacity of the dog. When the king's hounds encounter Bisclavret in the forest while hunting, the werewolf rushes to the king and makes a gesture of submission:

Vers lui curut quere merci.  
 Il l'aveit pris par sun estrié,  
 La jambe li baise e le pié. (146-48)

it ran to him to ask mercy.  
 It took him by the stirrup,  
 it kisses his leg and his foot.

Bisclavret's intelligence and discernment are immediately noted by the king:

"Seignurs," fet il, "avant venez!  
 Ceste merveillë esgardez,  
 Cum ceste beste se humilie!

Ele ad sen de hume, merci crie.

.....

Ceste beste ad entente e sen.” (151-55, 157)

“Lords,” he said, “come here at once!

Look at this wonder,

how this beast humbles itself!

It has human understanding, it begs mercy.

.....

This beast has intelligence and understanding.”

The king’s assessment is reiterated by Marie’s narrator, who asserts that the wolf Bisclavret “esteit franc e deboniere, / Unques ne volt a rien mesfeire” [“was so noble and kind, / it never wished to do wrong in any way”] (179-80). Moreover, the use of “entente” in line 157 and “volt” in line 180 imply will and agency, which are dependent upon some degree of cognitive judgment. By exhibiting gentility, meekness, and rational discernment, Bisclavret marks himself as dog rather than wolf and elicits the corresponding response from the king and his court, leading them to conclude that when the wolf breaks out into uncharacteristic violence against Bisclavret’s former wife he must have good reason (240-50).

To be sure, one might object that Bisclavret’s behavior is more human than animal. Scholars have noted the ways in which the werewolf’s initial approach to its king mimics the act of homage, and this is usually the primary instance presented as evidence of the man trapped inside the wolf (Sconduto 45). However, while we may indeed read this moment as a human demonstration of fealty evoking the rites of homage, Crane reminds us that it is equally evocative of dog behavior:

Surrounded as he is by hunting dogs, the cross-species template for his wolfish kisses might resonate as strongly with the animals as with the human. That is, it seems as plausible that one of the king’s dogs might lick his foot as that one of his huntsman might kiss it. To the extent that the werewolf’s gestures recall a dog’s, they are not evidently due to the “mind of a man.” (59)

Once we acknowledge the parallels with animal behavior, we open up new avenues for exploring the potential significance of the lai’s events.

Because so many readers have read Bisclavret’s behavior through a purely human lens, interpretations of the werewolf tearing the nose from



his wife's face have also focused entirely on its significance in human terms. The standard explanation is that cutting off the nose was a punishment for a number of crimes, but typically adultery (Burgess 104, Rothschild 135 n. 115). Though Bruckner questions whether this was true outside of folklore, finding no mention of such punishment in medieval feudal or canon law (262), Valentin Groebner cites frequent mention of nose-cutting for private vengeance for sexual infidelity in the judicial records of Nuremberg from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (72). That would certainly seem to fit here, as after the wife learns of her husband's lycanthropy she takes up with the knight she has enlisted to hide the clothing by which Bisclavret effects his transformation. That the wife's disfigurement is "strikingly similar to the effects of leprosy" (Sayers 82) suggests another link to the crime of adultery, for leprosy was considered to be a marker of "carnality, unbridled lust, even moral depravity" (Holten 199). Intriguingly, this suggests yet another connection between the wife's punishment and her own wolfish behavior; synthesizing arguments by Katheryn Holten and William Sayers, Leslie Dunton-Downer explains that "the tearing off of the nose makes the wife, as figurative *lupa*, look like a *lepra* and exposes her bestial nature" (209). Moreover, as a monstrous-seeming woman without a nose, the wife would presumably be less likely to perpetuate her crime again in the future.

Yet to insist upon the noselessness as a punishment for a specifically sexual transgression falls somewhat short of the mark in Marie's lai, for adultery does not seem to encompass the totality of the wife's betrayal. For all that Groebner's brief synopsis of the lai asserts that Bisclavret's "unfaithful wife maliciously bans him to his animal form in order to live with her lover" (75), Marie makes it quite clear that the wife had no interest in the knight who sought her love: "Ele ne l'aveit unc amé / Ne de s'amur aseüré" ["she had never loved him / or promised him her love"] (107-08). Only after she has decided to take advantage of the knight's devotion to her to get rid of her husband does she accept his advances. Moreover, Bisclavret's wife does not merely abandon her husband for another, but rather betrays her husband's trust and his deepest secret and condemns him to remain in his wolf form. One might simply argue that her punishment marks her more broadly as a traitor, and indeed M. Faure makes a brief note asserting that *desnatio* was a punishment reserved for traitors in the *chanson de geste* (355), though he does not elaborate on this point. Nevertheless, we are no closer to understanding why noselessness is an appropriate fate for Bisclavret's

wife, or why the nose is a fitting target for Bisclavret's canine rage. Though Bruckner claims that "[Bisclavret's] rage is not that of the werewolf; it is the understandably human and feudal desire for vengeance, the appropriate punishment of his wife's betrayal" (262), it is only if we see the nose from the dog's perspective that its appropriateness truly becomes evident.

Both medieval and modern people recognize that dogs privilege their sense of smell. In the epigraph that begins this essay, Gerald of Wales notes the way that dogs depend more on their noses than on their eyes and will use scent to confirm what they see, "as if nature had placed all the powers of infallibility in that feature" (130). Edward of Norwich also implies a connection between the dog's intelligence and its sense of smell: "an hounde hath greet mynde and greet smelling" (44). In our own era, Cesar Millan, a keen observer of dog behavior and star of National Geographic's wildly popular show *The Dog Whisperer*, continually reminds his clients that whereas humans privilege first our mouths and ears for communication and then the eyes, with the nose and its sense of smell so attenuated as to be virtually meaningless, dogs privilege the sense organs in the opposite order (Millan 93). Modern science confirms that, in contrast with humans, the nose is the dog's primary tool for communication; dogs not only have multiple sensory systems devoted to olfaction but also have 220 million to 2 billion olfactory neurons in comparison to a paltry 12-40 million in humans (Miklósi 144). Thus, for a dog, "his nose not only dominates his face, it also dominates his brain and thus his picture of the world. Human brains are predominantly shaped and structured around vision and processing light-related data, but the dog's brain is built around the information it gets from scents" (Coren 50).

Reliance upon scent is of course true for all canines, yet perhaps even more so for domesticated dogs. Ethologists John Bradshaw and Helen Nott attest that while both wolves and dogs use a variety of visual communication methods, dogs seem to rely on them less than their wild ancestors do, in large part because "selection by humans for certain morphological characters has reduced some dogs' abilities to use certain structures for visual communication" (119).<sup>10</sup> Human preferences for neotenic traits such as smaller noses and mouths, most vividly exemplified in the flattened muzzles of the modern pug, "may in fact have shaped select breeds' capacities to communicate through nonverbal cues, with profound perceptual and relational consequences" (Woodward, Milliken, and Humy 238). Such breeds are incapable of

performing more than a small fraction of the visual signals produced by wolves (Bradshaw and Nott 119). As a result, between dogs of different breeds “visual communication appears to play little part in many interactions,” possibly because “modification of their signaling structures” has produced “incompatible visual signals” (Bradshaw and Nott 125). In other words, social cues conveyed by body language in general, but particularly facial expressions, have been blunted to some degree in domesticated canines, leaving them more dependent than their wild cousins upon scent for their knowledge of their social world.

It is difficult to overemphasize the degree to which dogs rely on scent for social communication. Among the most important scents are pheromones, which not only convey information about sexual readiness but a host of other kinds of information as well, including emotional state. As Stanley Coren explains, “Reading pheromone scents is, for the dog, the equivalent of reading a written message about the status and feelings of another animal” (60). This may serve an important evolutionary purpose as well: “For social animals like dogs . . . knowing the emotional state of his companions might increase the chances of survival of the whole pack” (Coren 61). This is equally true in domestic environments, for “dogs that live in the same household will sniff each other frequently to get a quick update on how their housemate is feeling today and advance warning of any negative or aggressive feelings” (62). The nose is the primary means by which the dog knows who is friend and who is foe.

Though humans have evolved to have a greater reliance on sight than on scent, the persistence of the nose as a metaphor for knowing (to sniff out the truth, plain as the nose on one’s face) suggests our continuing, implicit recognition of the significance of scent and the insights the nose can provide. This may at least partially account for Gregory the Great’s explication, in his *Book of Pastoral Rule*, of the nose as a symbol of discernment “whereby we elect virtue and reject sin” (45). Thinking of the nose as an instrument of knowing is the key to understanding its significance in *Bisclavret*. Dunton-Downer makes the tantalizing suggestion that Marie is playing on the Old French idiom “n’avoir point du nez,” which means to be unreasonable or to lack good sense (209). The wife’s noselessness signifies her failure to perceive the truth of her husband’s character. In biting off his wife’s nose, Bisclavret makes visible and literal her failure of perception and judgment: she was too caught up in surface appearances to recognize that no matter his outward appearance, her husband was the same as he ever was.

Noselessness makes the wife's error of discernment visible, providing a way for other humans to "read" the wife's treacherous nature.

For Dunton-Downer, the idiomatic connection she notes is evidence that the wife's punishment is poetic and thus inherently human: "The poetic nature of the act (i.e., its ipseity, that no other act or body part would mean as much or as well as the nose) is the supreme sign of the wolf's humanness and of his possession of a self, a linguistic interiority (209). Poetic, yes—but also supremely canine, for in depriving his wife of her nose, Bisclavret has rendered his wife dependent solely upon sight and sound, those senses most vulnerable to deception by others. Bisclavret's wife can now rely only on more fallible human means of discerning truth. This is a *contrapasso* of which Dante would be proud, in which the figurative nature of the wife's sin, her failure to perceive and act on truth correctly, is made concrete and literal. The wife's noselessness thus marks her outwardly as evil at the same time that it deprives her of the instrument—metaphorical for humans, literal for canines—which would allow her to recognize evil intent in others. In canine terms, Bisclavret's vengeance is complete.

Whether dogs actually possess a concept of vengeance is difficult if not impossible to determine. In her recent article, Emma Campbell seems to suggest that what denotes Bisclavret's violence as human is its rational, avenging impetus, whereas animal violence is mere mindless savagery (100). Medieval people however, appear to have had no trouble attributing desire for revenge to dogs. In one of the most famous passages in the bestiary tradition, recounted as well by Ambrose of Milan and Gerald of Wales, a dog whose master has been murdered later attacks the perpetrator to exact its vengeance:

It happened that the man who had committed the crime, acting confidently in order to convince people of his innocence—such is the cunning way in which men think—joined the circle of onlookers and, feigning grief, approached the corpse. Then the dog, briefly abandoning its doleful lament, took up the arms of vengeance, seized the man and held him. (Aberdeen Bestiary, fol. 19r-19v)

Like Bisclavret's king and his court, the onlookers conclude that the dog must have just cause. When the murderer can offer no evidence in his defense, he is punished based on the dog's mute testimony alone, and the dog obtains his vengeance.

In Marie's *lais* animals have much to teach humans, and it is no different here. The king's advisor has learned from the wolf how to read others properly, based on evidence of character rather than appearance, and it is he who finally makes the logical connection between the knight who had disappeared and the wolf's behavior toward the missing knight's wife:

“Ceo est la femme al chevalier  
 Que taunt par suliez avoir chier,  
 Que lung tens ad esté perduz;  
 Ne seümes qu'est devenuz.  
 Kar metez la dame en destreit,  
 S'aucune chose vus direit,  
 Pur quei ceste beste la heit;  
 Fetes li dire se ele le seit!” (251-58)

“This is the wife of the knight  
 whom you used to hold so dear,  
 who has been missing for a long time;  
 we never knew what became of him.  
 Put the lady under duress about this,  
 to see if she will tell you anything  
 about why this beast hates her;  
 make her tell it if she knows!”

Bisclavret has taught the king and his advisor how to read beyond the wife's fair appearance and courteous words, revealing her as the traitor she is. The canine teaches the court, and the *lai* teaches us, not to rely solely on such fallible means of discerning truth.

Dogs cannot, of course, teach us to rely on scent as they do. If in our evolutionary history humans ever possessed such an ability, we lost it once we began to privilege other senses (Wang and Tedford 86). Yet given our overwhelming dependence upon verbal language, dogs provide us with an essential reminder that words are not enough, and interacting with dogs may even help us improve other forms of social communication. Citing a study of German adolescents that found that pet owners were more skilled at decoding human, non-verbal facial expressions than those who did not have extensive interactions with nonhuman animals, behavior scientist Lynette Hart suggests that “the experience of talking and playing with a pet, especially a dog, may

educate a child in some of the subtleties of social relationships” (167). Observing our canine companions closely can help us learn to read each other better, to know as the dog knows.

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## Notes

An earlier version of this essay was presented at the International Medieval Congress annual meeting in Kalamazoo, MI on May 13, 2010. I wish to thank Jennifer Walton-Hanley and Marijane Osborn for their helpful suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> The Aberdeen Bestiary provides an excellent example of the ways that animal behavior may be read allegorically:

In some ways preachers are like dogs: by their admonitions and righteous ways they are always driving off the ambushes laid by the Devil, lest he seize and carry off God's treasure— Christian souls. As the dog's tongue, licking a wound, heals it, the wounds of sinners, laid bare in confession, are cleansed by the correction of the priest. As the dog's tongue heals man's internal wounds, the secrets of his heart are often purified by the deeds and discourse of the Church's teachers. As the dog is said to be temperate in its ways, the man who is set over others diligently studies wisdom and must avoid drunkenness and gluttony in every way, for Sodom perished in a surfeit of food. Indeed, there is no quicker way for the Devil, his enemy, to take possession of man than through his greedy gullet. The dog returning to its vomit signifies those who, after making their confession, heedlessly return to wrongdoing. The dog leaving its meat behind in the river, out of desire for its shadow, signifies foolish men who often forsake what is theirs by right out of desire for some unknown object; with the result that, while they are unable to obtain the object of their desire, they needlessly lose what they have given up. (fol. 19v-20r)

<sup>2</sup>       And as I wente, ther cam by mee  
           A whelp, that fauned me as I stood,  
           That hadde yfolowed and koude no good.  
           Hyt com and crepte to me as lowe  
           Ryght as hyt hadde me yknowe,  
           Helde down hys hed and joyned hys eres,  
           And leyde al smothe doun hys heres. (388-94)

For two excellent articles that focus on Chaucer's figure of the whelp in *The Book of the Duchess*, see John Block Friedman, "The Dreamer, the Whelp, and Consolation in the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 3 (1969), 145-62, and Carol Falvo Heffernan, "That Dog Again: *Melancholia Canina* and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*," *Modern Philology* 84.2 (1986), 185-90.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Bartholomaeus' comment that "þe cruelnesse of an hound abateþ if a man sitteþ on grounde" (1166), an observation echoed in trainers' advice on how to calm a fearful dog.

<sup>4</sup> In particular, Crane also notes the parallels between Bisclavret's behavior and that of dogs in the bestiary tradition, which I will discuss later in this essay.

<sup>5</sup> Throughout this essay I use the term *canine* to refer to the genus that includes both wolves and dogs, using the latter terms to differentiate between wild and domestic canines.

<sup>6</sup> For Marie's Anglo-Norman text, I am using Ewert's edition. The Modern English translation is that of Claire Waters.

<sup>7</sup> Noting the same similarities between the werewolf Bisclavret and the characterization of dogs as opposed to wolves in the medieval bestiary tradition, Crane speculates that Marie may have taken inspiration from such texts: "Marie's work shares enough detail with the bestiaries' juxtaposition of wolf, dog, and man that it seems possible she consulted a bestiary manuscript" (68). As Ménard suggests (177), it may be that in order to make her werewolf protagonist sympathetic Marie had no choice other than to give him qualities more doglike than wolf-like, at least according to how each animal was characterized by medieval writers.

<sup>8</sup> Dogs might even be tried on the same terms as their human owners, receiving the same punishment (Pluskowski 86). See also Vitale Huhn, "Löwe und Hund als Symbole des Rechts." *Mainfränkisches Jahrbuch für Geschichte und Kunst* 7 (1955): 1-63.

<sup>9</sup> This seems to be true in general of those texts that largely seek to describe dogs as living creatures, rather than merely as figurative exemplars of human virtues or vices. In fables such as Marie's "The Dog and the Cheese" or "The Dog and the Sheep" and in exegetical texts such as the *Fasciculus Morum*, dogs are more likely to be portrayed negatively, particularly as allegorical representations of folly or gluttony. See Salisbury 133-34 and Pluskowski 85-89.



<sup>10</sup> The difficulty of reading facial cues is further compounded by contemporary aesthetics concerning dogs, as “human preferences for certain dog phenotypes (for example, docked tails and ears) may in fact have shaped select breeds’ capacities to communicate through nonverbal cues, with profound perceptual and relational consequences” (Woodward, Milliken, and Humy 238). This is already true of toy dogs in the classical Roman period, bred to retain neotenic characteristics such as smaller noses and mouths (Salisbury 116).

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